

“Good Enough For Now”

The Masked and Anonymous DVD Review

By Trev Gibb, Webmaster of *‘The Masked & Anonymous Database’*

Finally, after months of obsessively watching ‘Masked and Anonymous’ on both a hazily dubbed VHS tape and then a rough and ready DVD-r, the official ‘Masked And Anonymous’ DVD arrived on my doorstep, a few days after its American release. Yes, it’s a region 1 and before you ask no it isn’t RCE encoded; it actually plays on non-region 1 DVD players. I should know, considering I probably have the cheapest DVD player available.

Ok where do I begin? On the heels of Rimbaud? Well not exactly, more on the heels of Larry Charles actually.

Of all the special features featured on the DVD, including numerous deleted scenes, a song performance and a behind the scenes documentary, the director’s commentary was where I wanted to begin my adventure.

Larry’s commentary follows the typical mould we have come to expect from most Film or TV series DVD’s, we gain insight into the methods and techniques used by the director, his crew and the actors during the filming process. We also learn about the context of the film, about particular scenes and why they were filmed, but most importantly we see things from the director’s perspective. It’s a chance to get into the mind of the director. One of the best things about Larry’s commentary however, is that you feel his burning enthusiasm for the film. He appears conversational and eager to fill us with as much detail as possible and he is constantly relaying information our way, such as how the Networks office was constructed hastily on the soundstage with corrugated metal and bits of scrap when the previous location fell through and as Charles points out, it highlights the “resourcefulness” of the crew, something one could also align with the movie itself, which survived remarkably well on a budget of around £6.9 million. Of course the commentary is also another chance for the director to try to explain certain elements of the film, and there are many, many that most certainly evaded not only the viewing public, but also the critics, who as we know have to a large extent refused to engage directly with the film and thus failed in getting anything constructive from it.

I had been fortunate enough to have interviewed Larry Charles a few months prior to the release of the DVD and had the privilege to speak to him for longer than the duration of the average football match. It was an amazing and inspiring experience, and what you notice about Larry from the moment he begins speaking is how enthusiastic and passionate he is about ‘Masked and Anonymous’ and also about Dylan. Unfortunately however, this passion and enthusiasm when it came to the DVD seems only to have extended itself as far as the commentary.

Larry’s influence on the production of the DVD was not as major as his influence was in actually making the movie and this is a real pity. So before people begin to throw stones at the current DVD version - as I’m sure some will - it is important to note that - as he actually told me when I asked him about the DVD - he could only really suggest ideas for the DVD and the final decisions would be fall with those involved directly with the DVD production and crucially with Jeff Rosen. Of course this has in many ways been an opportunity wasted, because many of the great ideas I’m sure Larry would’ve had for the DVD release never came to fruition. However, we’re not

just dealing with any normal movie, we're dealing with Bob Dylan which of course means that overall, the feelings he and his management would have concerning the DVD and the film in general would probably take precedence over everything and everyone else. Furthermore, the people involved in the DVD would of course be looking at the financial feasibility as well as the marketability of the DVD more than loading it up with more scene outtakes and live performances, to keep us Dylan-nuts happy. And so in a way the art suffers, but I guess that's what happens when business and art combine. That being said, the special features that are included are worthy of discussion, its just a pity a bonus disc was not included with the DVD including the live performances, which would've been a brilliant idea considering that currently we don't have much at all in the video/DVD field to represent Dylan as a live performer. In this medium Dylan is considerably lacking in comparison with many of his contemporaries.

In talking of the special features, as I've stated above, we're not necessarily left as high and dry as it may appear, though considering the never-ending thirst of Bob Dylan fans the features on the DVD are in some ways an anti-climax. This even appears to apply to the up and coming Unplugged DVD, which I believe has no special features worth mentioning at all. Where is I Want You? It was featured on the original broadcast and being *the* performance of the two shows it should rightly be on the DVD.

Anyway, back to 'Masked And Anonymous'.

I was initially excited about the inclusion of 'Standing In The Doorway' as one of the deleted scenes in the special features and admit that I got the goose-pimples while watching it, but it seems we were misled. Am I the only person who was actually expecting a full version of the song without dialogue over the top? surely not? I understand it was a scene in itself and thus in the context of the film, not meant to be the full song, but why not have the full song instead? As enjoyable as I found the scene to be and as great as it was to see Bob doing 'Standing In The Doorway', I found it to be rather teasing and irritating, in fact I felt cheated. The video quality of this particular track was also questionable. Whether this was to ensure it would fit on the DVD - as the two final deleted scenes appear to be poorer quality - I don't know, but surely there is a better copy of this in the vaults?

However, on a lighter note I found the performance of Standing In The Doorway - if even only two verses - to be a wonderfully transcendent moment and one I look forward to seeing and hearing in full some time in the future. The way Dylan articulates the words, the way he strikes the guitar in his rather perfunctory style and how it echoes back at him in the midst of Larry's chordal finesse and Charlie's soaring organ-style guitar chimes is just beautiful and one of those truly brilliant Dylan moments. This is Dylan captured at a moment when he and his band of the time had a real *distinct sound*, and a *real groove* happening. And for that reason alone that performance - as with the ones on the soundtrack - is important.

I'm sure when the 'Masked and Anonymous' concert performances finally surface in full, they will be the goldmine that Larry has mentioned. Charles himself believes all of the footage and recordings from Masked & Anonymous will prove to be "a great historical archive", one not "to be exploited commercially" but one that at some point may see release. From what he told me and from what I've seen I certainly agree with him. I'm especially exited to see and hear the transcendent instrumental version of 'All Along The Watchtower' he mentioned in our interview and that would definitely have been a wonderful addition to the special features.

Aside from 'Standing In The Doorway' the only other musical inclusions we get are very brief fragments during the behind-the-scenes documentary titled "Masked and Anonymous Exposed". These fragments are teasing, yet pleasing. We get to see part of what appears to be a haunting 'Knockin' On Heavens Door', which apparently brought many on the set to tears. Seeing these live performances in such an informal way - if even fragmentary - is fascinating because we get to see Bob interact with his band in ways we may not see as an audience at a concert, such as Larry laughing at Bob's Rainy-Day-Women-styled blues riff at the closing of Heavens Door or Tony Garnier consulting with and advising Bob over the songs. Also of interest, especially to me, was the brief fragment before 'Heavens Door' of Dylan and band playing a rather jazzy song and I'm sure I'm not the only one wondering what that song was?

'Exposed' is an interesting little documentary and one of the more endearing qualities of the special features, although it is short. For one, we actually get to see Dylan appearing rather naturally, laughing and joking and basically enjoying himself. As Charles said to Dylan regarding the filming, which I think is important in this context:

"Listen, we have 20 days to shoot this movie, if you go back to the trailer after each shot, each take, the crew is just not gonna care, but if I get you a comfortable chair and you sit on the set between takes and so as the crew walks by carrying the cables, carrying the ladders, they can go "Hi Bob" and you can nod at them, these people will die for you"

And it was perhaps in Bob being present on set throughout the movie, without ever going to his trailer, and allowing them as Charles said "to have a personal relationship with Bob" which enabled things to run so smoothly and for the film to be so wonderfully shot and wonderfully performed by the cast. In Exposed, this, and the ease between Dylan and the people around him is notable and poignant.

Also in reference to this Charles also said that Dylan needs to be called 'Bob', "because 'Dylan' is *our* problem. Dylan is what *we've* imposed on him", it's "the mythological part", the part that's "too big a burden for him to bear", and at least on the set we seem to see that burden lifted. Dylan appears comfortable and able to be at least as natural as is possible for Bob Dylan. Seeing Dylan laughing with Jeff Bridges, joking with a crew guy and in deep conversation with Jessica Lange is fascinating and intriguing. Alex Brunner (writer and director of *Exposed* with Matt Radecki) must certainly be commended on this, as it was he who filmed the behind the scenes shots. He captures the mood, and as short as the Exposed documentary is, there are some wonderful moments.

The interviews with the actors, conducted by Jeff Rosen, also provide great insight into the Dylan myth and we see how much actors such as Penelope Cruz and Luke Wilson respect Dylan. In fact some of the comments made by Luke Wilson are the most pertinent, such as when he ends with "I don't know who Jack Fate is, but I know I'm interested in him" and I think that applies both brilliantly to the movie and to Dylan himself.

Jessica Lange's comments in reference to Dylan and his similarity to Tennessee Williams, is also intriguing. She explains how all good writing is musical and rhythmical and how Dylan's experience in music lends itself perfectly to the acting profession and to writing in movies. Giovanni Ribisi's comments on working with Dylan and how his own performance - which for me echoed the intensity of Pacino in *Godfather I* - was squashed by the intensity and amount "soul coming from my left

side”, is also pertinent and in many ways explains why people find Dylan so hard to except and understand as an actor, let alone a musician. Basically, Dylan is an actor and a great one; he’s been playing the role Bob Dylan all his working life, so he must have a bit experience.

As an actor the key to his effectiveness often lies in his face. Dylan’s face is a paradox, it simultaneously implies and hides a thousand things, he’s ambiguous and his Bogart-like cynicism is what drives his performance in the film. Dylan’s lack of dialogue in many of the scenes is not the shortfall that many believe it to be. In fact his lack of dialogue is essential to the power of his performance. The intensity of focus and the Sergio Leone styled close-ups on his face speak volumes more, emotionally, than any dialogue. In many ways Dylan is as much the cynical film-noir Humphrey Bogart as he is western-noir Clint Eastwood. It’s what he doesn’t say that’s important.

John Goodman’s paralleling of Dylan and Charles’ script as being of a similar quality to both Marlowe and Shakespeare is also appropriate and true and it harks back to what Charles said in my interview with him about Dylan “being a bard” on the level of Yeats, or Blake, or Byron, as well as Marlowe and Shakespeare. But perhaps one of the most pertinent comments made by Charles – one that perfectly aligns with what many of the actors have said about his script - is how Dylan is perhaps one of the “last well read people”. And essentially it’s true. Dylan can quote almost anything, and in recent times, he has used this talent and this knowledge and wisdom in his songwriting, which has lead importantly to the lyrical intensity of both Time out of Mind and Love And Theft as well as finally in the film based context of Masked And Anonymous. Charles calls Dylan’s technique, the aligning of “the quaint with the post-modern”. Although to a certain extent Dylan has always toyed with allusions and references, with many of the characters in his songs being both literary and important cultural figures, it only appears to have been executed with such precision and consistency with Love And Theft, Time Out Of Mind and Masked and Anonymous, although it was always there below the surface and initially most obviously in 1985 with the release of Empire Burlesque, where Dylan played with the use of lines from films such as “The Maltese Falcon”, again re-emphasising the connection with Dylan and Humphrey Bogart.

Larry has himself called Dylan a “Post-apocalyptic Humphrey Bogart”, and I would tend to agree with him. Dylan, as the person we see on stage, hear in song and see on the movie screen is very much the character to which Charles refers. Bob Dylan is a great actor. It is this richness, this almost impenetrability as an actor, as a person and as a writer that baffles and confounds many people and importantly, many of the critics, who instantly panned M&A upon release. The lyrical and poetic quality of the film overall, was too much for them; too much to handle. They were unable to engage and unable to respond and they wouldn’t allow it to wash over them.

In thinking of the script and its Shakespearian quality, comments made by Dylan in an interview with Songtalk magazine from 1991 apply perfectly. In response to comments made by the interviewer, Paul Zollo, about Shakespeare’s work, Dylan replied “People have a hard time accepting anything that overwhelms them” and this essentially seems to be the problem not only with ‘Masked and Anonymous’ but with Dylan himself.

The behind the scenes documentary for all its shortness in length helps to expand on the perceptions we have of Dylan, if even paradoxically, adding mystique and

intrigue to it, because we are confronted with what appears to be a very human Dylan, a perception contrary to popular belief.

The outtake scenes as part of the special features are also wonderful to see, particularly the alternate scene in the Bar with Fred Ward and Luke Wilson, which I personally prefer to the official version. It has a real noiresque, yet comic feel, and the violence in the scene works perfectly as a contrast to the 'Lady In Red' scene which follows- the scene left off the official cut - with Lara Elena Harring and Dylan. There are some brilliant pieces of dialogue in the bar scene however, particularly when Wilson exclaims, "you want the world to be flat its flat, you want it to be round, its round" to which Ward replies "I know some things too you know" with Wilson explaining that "the more you'll know the more you'll suffer". This is a classic piece of dialogue - and one of many great pieces in the film as a whole - which I find both beautifully sad and poetic, yet hilariously funny.

The following scene, in the station with Harring is also wonderfully dark, but it has an almost dreamlike quality, with the distant saxophone and the vague acting style of Harring making the interaction between her and Dylan enchanting and mesmerizing. The scene is almost like a memory, as if the 'Lady in Red' isn't there and is just a dream, a figment of the imagination. After all in the scene with Giovanni Ribisi in released cut, Dylan as Fate states that in his dreams he's "walking through fire with intense heat" and in the 'Lady in Red' scene we discover Harring's character met Jack Fate in The Inferno Club, perhaps a reference to Dante but of course the important motifs here are that of 'Dreams' and 'fire'. In many ways Masked And Anonymous is concerned with parallels and oppositions and with "what is real and what is not"¹.

The scene with crew guys Chris Penn and Christian Slater is also refreshing to watch. Its playfulness and the elements of light comedy work in perfect contrast with the two previous scenes. They have the feel of a comedic moment often found in Marlowe or Shakespeare or in the use of rustics or a chorus in 18th and 19th century novels, whereby they provide a temporary release from tension and friction in the plot. The bull whip joke of course is priceless and ridiculously funny and again we get that feeling of the Carnavalesque which dominates much of the movie in both in the dialogue and visually.

Of all the deleted scenes, aside from the scene with 'Standing In The Doorway', I find the scene with Penelope Cruz as Pagan Lace and Jeff Bridges as Tom Friend particularly moving. To me it presents Penelope Cruz's best performance in the film and thus it is a pity it didn't appear in the finished cut. Bridges' performance is also particularly intense and as perverse as his dialogue appears, his emotion is convincing although contradictory in comparison with the character he plays in many of the other scenes, particularly when he harasses Jack Fate. Again this scene symbolises how contradictory each of the characters are, and how they all seem to have suffered an element of pain in their lives and how it leads them into being contradictory, into being controlled or perhaps out of control because of their cynicism and perhaps lost in the chaos of their lives so much so that they become masked and anonymous. Tom Friend's story in many ways outlines one of the themes of the film, and perhaps a theme in life, that in times of trouble, in times of pain, in times when the mind can not comprehend or accept reality, when life is at its most carnivalesque, "everyone had to put on a mask"

Larry Charles said to me in reference to the DVD you've all seen or are about to see, that its:

¹ Gates of Eden

“Not the definitive version, there’s still yet my directors cut somewhere down the line, if we can get the financing together we’ll put that out to, that’s kind of more expensive to put together”

Larry is right of course, it’s not the definitive version, if there ever could be a definitive version, which mean having the complete script-version released. But for the moment this DVD is the only version we can legally own and as thirsty as we all are for more, we’re going to have to sit around and wait for a while. However, the DVD release isn’t actually that bad. The behind the scenes documentary is enlightening and revealing and the commentary is more than filling and impressive in the facts and information it relays. The deleted scenes are exciting and intriguing and further present how much more of this film there is yet to see, as well as how great many of the performances are, especially that of the performance/scene with ‘Standing In The Doorway’ which is truly magical.

In taking some of Dylan and Larry’s advice perhaps it is best to consider with the DVD in mind that “The path is the goal” and it is “the process and not the result” that is important, and that at some point in the near future we will see what Larry and Bob truly envisioned, away from the pressures of marketability, finance and of media scrutiny. In the end Dylan said the film should be viewed in the long-run, so I guess we’re in for a long run. Also, talking of finance, if we each drew £500 out of our bank accounts or just robbed a bank if in desperation we may be able to help Larry Charles along on his “path” to releasing the definitive ‘Masked And Anonymous’. And though “there’s a way to get there”², this will have to be “good enough for now”³

² Highlands, *Time out of Mind*

³ Highlands, *Time out of Mind*